

## Review Article

## The Odd One Out? Revisiting the Belgian Welfare State

Cor Wagenaar

Why is it that Belgium is often seen as the odd one out, the country where practically everything is dealt with in slightly different ways than in the rest of Europe? And what makes foreigners think that these ways are not only out of sync, but also less efficient than they might be? Of course, the country's curious make-up of two semi-autonomous parts with their own language and culture, with Brussels acting as a universe in its own right, does not help much. Moreover, the Belgians themselves tend to cultivate their special status, even if this results in statements like that of the famous architect Renaat Braem, who, in 1968, claimed that Belgium was 'the ugliest country in the world'. And so, Belgium's special properties appear to have become something like a gimmick its inhabitants tend to cherish.

In a way, this gimmick figures quite prominently in Michael Ryckewaert's recent publication on the transformation of the nation into a full-blown, modern welfare state in the years between 1945 and 1973: *Building the Economic Backbone of the Belgian Welfare State. Infrastructure, planning and architecture 1945-1973*. The dates are no coincidence: though liberated in 1944, the reconstruction years started only after the defeat of the Germans, and in 1973 the infamous oil crisis virtually wrecked the premises on which the welfare state had been built - not only in Belgium, but everywhere in the Western world. From the very first pages, Ryckewaert paints a picture of a process that perfectly reflects what had been going on in the neighbouring countries as well, but he also makes clear right from

the start that actual processes at stake followed an inner logic of their own, one that is, obviously, typically Belgian.

By implication, the spatial qualities of the welfare state, the topic of Ryckewaert's book, also show peculiarities that are characteristic of the country that produced them. Some of these are quite striking: the virtual absence of public housing and the dominance of privately owned (and often privately built) single family houses, the way these houses fan out over the countryside, the lack of integrated neighbourhood centres that concentrate all provisions needed for everyday life - all these features set Belgium apart from its neighbours. Ryckewaert maintains that the widespread use of the industrial park is also typical of the Belgian welfare state. Inspired by British and American examples, these parks were well planned. Both the low-density sprawl and the industrial parks depend heavily on the use of the car, which was accommodated by the construction of a network of unusually spacious motorways (which, another quality often viewed as typically Belgian, are exceptionally well lit at night).

How to explain the characteristics of the Belgian welfare state? Ryckewaert goes at great lengths to outline some of the tools that might assist him in finding the right answers. He refers to the 'regulation theory', a characteristically French approach to economic planning, as a model that explains the reconstruction of the economy after each crisis, and mentions periods allegedly epitomized by a

'coherent spatial economic development mode'. By far the best decision he then took, however, is to discard these instruments, since, as he more or less ruefully concedes, they did not seem to work. And so his study turned out to be a historical survey in which some of the usual historical qualities seem to be lacking: only few of the trends and tendencies he outlines are related to the mindsets of the people responsible for them. The book contains no lengthy biographies, nor excursions into the peculiar processes of policy-making. Instead, the author focuses on precisely those aspects he put forward in the title: infrastructure, planning and architecture, all of them presented, in the first instance, as phenomena that just simply happened, and only then defined as developments that need to be explained. For once, this approach appears to work quite well; reading between the lines one is led to believe that it saved the author from drowning in a swamp of political intricacies that would have been inexplicable to foreign readers, while probably not very helpful in explaining the situation.

*Building the Economic Backbone of the Belgian Welfare State. Infrastructure, planning and architecture 1945-1973* explains how the spatial reconstruction of Belgium contributed to the construction of the welfare state, a by now historical social model so well known that he refrains from elucidating what exactly it entailed. This may well be one of the very few aspects open to criticism. The welfare state, whatever its local characteristics, was essentially a collective model, the essence of which was that it opened the consumer products market to the masses of the working classes, who, only a few decades before, had not even dared to dream that they would be given a fair share of the pie. Everything was geared to the needs of what, in the Anglo-Saxon world, became known as the 'common man' or the 'man in the street'. The welfare state had decidedly collectivist traits, culminating in the provision of social security networks and a vast expansion of the public domain. Schools and

universities opened their doors to the lower classes, and when private car ownership spread to the lower classes - the ultimate symbol of their rise to dominance - the authorities embarked upon a road construction campaign unprecedented in scale and ambition. The crux of the model, therefore, was that it combined collectivist tools and mentalities with a capitalist system that was left intact. The reasons to promote this model were obviously political in nature, and it is more than doubtful if it would have survived without the context of the Cold War. Ryckewaert is right in pinpointing the crisis of 1973 as a marker of change, but only after 1989 did these changes imply the definitive end of the welfare state.

If collectivism is one of the key elements of the welfare state, its Belgian variant immediately appears to become somewhat problematic. By definition, the welfare state implies centralized planning, but this appears to have been incompatible with the Belgian way of doing things. The memories of wartime planning, when the Germans ruled the country, made it very unwise for politicians to promote strong central control, Ryckewaert argues, citing the virtual lack of central policies in the realm of architecture and urbanism to prove the point. From a practical point of view, the need for planning also appears to have been less abundantly clear than in the Netherlands, Germany or France, since Belgian industry escaped the level of destruction typical for these countries. Ryckewaert even maintains that this explains why the dollars channelled into the country thanks to the Marshall Plan were not used for the modernization of its industries: they were doing quite well and actually benefited from the dramatic situation abroad; obviously, the country had to catch up after its neighbours had managed to revitalize their economies. Since industry was the main pillar supporting the economy, the Walloons did a lot better than the Flemish during the first postwar decades, and only later did they have to pay the price for relying solely on economic activities that, in the end, were bound to fail.

In Belgium, planning therefore did not appear to have been the primary instrument in building the welfare state, as had been the case in most countries. But nevertheless, the assumption that the Belgian variant was marked solely by the capitalist aspects of the model is hard to defend. Spatial planning at the national and regional planning levels may have been limited to a few exemplary projects, such as the lower Meuse regional survey, for example, or the ten-year innovation project of the Port of Antwerp, but the social and economic policies that promoted the working classes, turning them into the dominant forces of a new economic environment, were affecting Belgium in much the same way as other countries. If one were to summarize the consequences of the welfare state for architecture and urbanism, this would boil down to the impact of the 'man in the street', and there is not a shred of doubt that this impact was as deep in Belgium as it was elsewhere. Obviously, housing and the new infrastructure were the fields where this impact was most visible. The housing explosion that needed to accommodate the 'man in the street' was channelled mainly towards public housing, and the results can justifiably be labelled as 'modern' - not because they bore the mark of modern designers, but mainly because the production of collective housing estates necessitated standardization, industrialization and mechanization, three qualities prewar modernists had already favoured, and which were now being realized, thanks to the combined forces of centralized planning and the modernization of the building trade. In Belgium, this 'modern' filter was notably lacking. Instead, the 1948 De Taeye Act sponsored the construction of individual, detached houses, offering mortgage guarantees and individual subsidies. Not surprisingly, most clients preferred traditional architecture and refrained from modern experiments; modernism has never been a really popular style, with the exception of the golden years of the International Style, which was uniquely suited to endow formerly 'monastic modern' design with the frivolous, optimistic aura of the consumer

state. In Belgium, therefore, the impact of the 'man in the street' as the architect's new client did not result in the massive modernization movement that is so typical for its neighbours. The second main area where the 'man in the street' conquered space was literally the street. Since car ownership became universal even at the lower end of the social ladder, the construction of road networks became imperative, and we have already mentioned how this changed the Belgian landscape. Moreover, thanks to the car, even the remotest regions were opened up for the mobilized crowds, resulting in the spread of a lifestyle designated at the time as characteristically urban.

Centralized planning may not have been the primary agent in the construction of the Belgian welfare state. Ryckewaert's study clearly demonstrates that there was no shortage of sometimes brilliant proposals. Particularly interesting was the idea to fill the Belgian territory with a system of linear cities. This occurred at about the same time this model was enthusiastically promoted in the Netherlands as well. Equally fascinating was a plan by the well-known Dutch urbanist Van Embden for a satellite town. Had it been realized as planned, a typically Dutch, fully-fledged and complete city would have been built in a country where it would have been strangely out of place, almost as if a space vehicle had landed on the wrong planet (the comparison of the new housing estates with spacecraft was quite popular around 1960).

Ryckewaert's highly illuminating book unquestionably demonstrates how the Belgian welfare state came into being and also makes clear why, in some respects at least, it developed as a very specific variant of the general model. That in itself is a major achievement. However, some questions remain, but answering them probably fell outside the scope of his book. One of the book's puzzling aspects is the use of the word 'modern'. Since the eighteenth century, the term has come to designate a way of

doing things that breaks away from convention, prejudice and religious dogma, and instead intends to promote a rational, scientific view of the world. In the course of the twentieth century, it also became the household name for a new design approach in the arts, literature, the cinema, architecture and urbanism. In the 1950s and 1960s, it became the 'style' of the socially more balanced model of the welfare state, and for a short time both meanings of the term appeared to coincide almost perfectly (contrary to the barbarian, totalitarian regimes that dominated the preceding decades and represented themselves with heavy, megalomaniac variants of classicism, allegedly providing the ultimate proof of modernism's political correctness). From today's perspective it has become quite clear that modernism has never been as politically innocent as its protagonists in the 1950s led us to believe; modernism lost its moral authority and became a style in much the same way that the Renaissance or the Baroque had been in previous centuries. Thus, one might argue, the two meanings of the term should be separated. In its original meaning, the Belgian welfare state is a typically modern phenomenon, since it broke with the conventions and traditions of prewar society. In terms of style, however, a considerable part of what has been designed is a lot less modern than what we find, for example, in the Netherlands; most of the housing stock, for instance, is highly traditional. As we have pointed out, even this traditional architecture is nevertheless an expression of the welfare state - and thus Ryckewaert may have wanted to explain why he completely ignored it, while presenting numerous examples of buildings and plans that follow the general outlines of the modern style. The simultaneous use of the two meanings of the term 'modern' reads like an echo of the distant past.

The heydays of the welfare state are long gone. All over Europe, the model has been dismantled and even left-wing politicians appear to accept a return to the 'normal' social relationships where, for

ideological reasons, the state's role is presented as a very modest one (although, of course, it is still effectively in charge). In Belgium, not only the welfare state has become a historical memory, the state that created it is also a thing of the past. It has been replaced by three semi-autonomous communities that forever frustrate the prospects of a unitary state. What started as a national project, has now split up into three separate societies that all confront the legacy of the past in their own, specific ways. For the time being, there is no better way to understand this legacy than reading Ryckewaert's thorough and very well-conceived book.

### Biography

Cor Wagenaar is Associate Professor at the Institute of History of Art, Architecture and Urbanism at TU Delft. His PhD-thesis of 1993 focused on the reconstruction of Rotterdam. He co-authored the monographic exhibition and catalogue *J.J.P. Oud. Poetic Functionalist 1890-1963* (2001). He is the author and editor of numerous books, among them *Healthcare Architecture in the Netherlands* (2010) and *Town Planning in the Netherlands since 1800. Responses to Enlightenment Ideals and Geopolitical Realities* (2011).